

THE ROLE OF CHURCH LEADERSHIP IN COMMUNITIES FACING SCHOOL DESEGREGATION

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I have some feeling that in this speech I may be bringing the dead back to life. In newspaper articles now you still hear mention of New Orleans and Little Rock. You rarely hear the slogan, "Remember Clinton." You also do not hear "Remember Atlanta, Georgia." I've often wondered if Clinton and Atlanta had something in common that neither Little Rock nor New Orleans experienced. However, I remember the Clinton experience as a complete and glorious victory, a gift of God to me, to the city, and to the church. I have no qualms or pains in reviving my memory of the details of the situation. I feel that my place on the program and contribution to the hour may be made best in the form of a personal testimony about our experiences there, as long ago as they seem now. So this paper is a testimony more than an essay. In giving you this first-hand source material you may see something I have not yet seen about the whole experience. So here goes.

Resume in Retrospect

Clinton, Tennessee, is near Oak Ridge. Oak Ridge, being a federally owned city, had already desegregated before the order was handed Clinton to desegregate. It being a federally operated school system, there was no question of compliance. About forty Negro students attended the large high school in Oak Ridge for two years before Clinton desegregated. There were some lawsuits concerning desegregation in Clinton as early as 1951. This was three or four years before the Supreme Court decision. They were based upon the fact that Anderson County had no Negro high school, and the Negro students, few in number, had to travel to Knox County, at their own expense, to get a high school education. Their case was built upon the premise that Clinton High School ought to be open to their few Negro students on this basis. The federal judge, Judge Robert Taylor, Knoxville, had decided that it was all right for the county to send the Negro students to Knoxville if the county paid both their tuition and their transportation, and this was based upon the equal facilities provision. He had so decided the case in late 1953, I believe. As soon as the Supreme Court decision was handed down in 1954 he immediately reversed his decision and ordered the Clinton High School to desegregate in the fall of 1956. The local newspaper kept Anderson County well informed of the legal proceedings and background, and community leaders, including myself, looked for any serious reaction from the people, but none was immediately forthcoming. Conversations between myself, the local school principal, and the local newspaper editor centered around conjectures as to what might happen as we moved toward obeying the court order. Since we were one of the first, we couldn't learn much from others. The school system moved in the direction of compliance with the law. Most citizens who spoke their feelings at all said something like, "I much prefer segregation, but I also believe in law and order." The radicals were waiting for a leader and biding their time.

Several important dates and incidents will suffice to summarize the story.

August, 1956--Several Negro students, approximately twelve, enrolled at Clington High School to start classes the next week. Several of us had our ears to the ground to hear what might be said or what might happen. I had several of our deacons and church leaders pledged to share with me what they heard or saw developing. John Kasper hit town on Friday. On Saturday morning leaflets were scattered throughout one section of town where he and his local cohorts might expect to get the best hearing. They advocated resistance, boycotting, public speeches, organization of the Citizens' Council. One deacon of our church happened to live in this section and was visited. He immediately came to my house with racist literature and with the radical sales talk. I immediately communicated with the local newspaper editor, a stable, sound-thinking man of the community, who in turn contacted members of the school board and city council. He quickly arranged a meeting for Sunday, 1:00 p.m. and invited me to attend. On my way to that meeting Sunday afternoon, I observed John Kasper and a man who was a member of our church corraling young people on the court square. After the conference of leaders, I investigated what Kasper's crowd was trying to

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get school students to do. Other responsible citizens located John Kasper, confronted him personally with our desires for community peace and order, asked him frankly what his intentions were. We tried desperately to know all that was going on.

The next week the storm broke loose with three hundred people pulled from back roads and hollows and the fringe of the immediate community. John Kasper, meeting with radical local agitators in a certain restaurant, led this group of citizens in daily slander parades and intimidation squads around the school and court house. Meetings were organized on the court house lawn for the evenings and the crowds grew, until two thousand people gathered by the end of the week.

Finally, on Saturday night, and at our Mayor's request, the Governor of the state ordered the State Patrol into Clinton, and National Guard units followed the next day. The Highway Patrol, with sirens screaming, saved the day in a very crucial moment. The National Guard units were a glad sight to behold.

I spoke in my church briefly, without centering the whole sermon around the theme, of the dedication of Christian citizens to law and order, whether we believed in segregation or integration. I was invited to meet with the community and army leaders every day, and took every opportunity to minister to the bivouacked troops. They established order within a week but it was a frigid order, martially imposed.

September--School went on with an uneasy peace, and with the National Guard gone. The radicals organized clandestinely. John Kasper was very active behind the scenes. Students within the school who would follow radical leadership were organized as persecution squads within the school itself. During these days I spent much time listening to what people were saying, thinking, and feeling. The evident tension promised that a new crisis would develop. The persecution and boycott of businessmen in the town who would not support the newly organized Citizens Council, coupled with student intimidations, kept the community restless.

Because I had not taken to the pulpit in both church and community with strong sermons about integration, a preacher from East Tennessee, who had had to move from a pastorate further south because of his integration preaching, wrote an editorial to the Knoxville papers deploring the fact that Clinton was without spiritual leadership in its pastors, that they showed a lack of Christian conviction and courage of leadership. He later apologized.

October--I found many opportunities during this month to discover the personal relations existing between the leadership people of the community, between members of City Council, between members of the County Court, members of the school board, and the relation of the County School Superintendent to the high school principal. I kept on listening, hoping for responsible leadership from "office holders."

November--Intimidation of the few Negro students had dwindled their number from twelve to seven. About the last of November the persecution was so bad and uncorrected that the Negroes refused to return to school. They stayed out for over a week. When this condition persisted for a week without responsible community leadership taking forthright democratic steps leading toward active solutions of the situation, my concern increased. I kept hearing of the personal injustices being perpetrated, and kept feeling that community leadership could not overlook this.

December--First Friday of December. Though I was not the oldest man among the pastors of Clinton, yet I was the senior pastor by reason of tenure, and therefore invited all of the pastors of the community to a meeting at my office. I simply said to them, "Here is what I have found out about our community situation at present. I personally feel that it is time for me to take a definite, public, and unequivocal stand. I felt that I must come out, and intend to do so this Sunday morning and evening." Among the several pastors present,

one testified that his small church had had a Negro member who had left after six or seven months of good treatment at the hands of the church members simply because she did desire a continued fellowship with people of her own race. All the pastors seemed to agree on the cruciality of conditions and need for Christian leadership. One pastor and myself traced back through channels of community leaders to ascertain their thinking and intentions. We found a lethargic attitude and a satisfaction on their parts if the radical group should succeed in driving the Negro children from school permanently. No one at that point was willing to take a definite positive stand, including the County School Superintendent.

At this point I made my decision to communicate with a fine Negro family whose daughter was one of the seven students. I simply said to this girl's mother, "I intend of my own free will to be down at the bottom of the hill leading from your Negro community to the high school a block away. Should the students decide to go to school next school day, I shall be there to walk with them. This is all I can promise, but I shall do this every school day until I hear from you or the students." Here is how I frankly felt at this time. I had lived in the community for eight years, but I had decided that if this kind of injustice should go uncorrected, I would not desire to live in the community any longer; but that if I could do anything to remedy the situation, it was time to act, without necessarily forcing anyone else to conform. My conscience was completely free and willing in this decision, thanks be to God.

Sunday, December 2--I preached a sermon on the story of the Good Samaritan on Sunday morning. Frankly, I didn't trust the Sunday morning crowd with my frankest and innermost feelings. I gave them enough to let them know really where I stood, but not much information about my plans. Back in the latter part of August I had taken a Wednesday evening to study with our prayer meeting group (they're the real Christians) the Bible teachings of race in the Old Testament as well as the New. On that December Sunday evening I tried to analyze the community situation from the standpoint of my Christian conscience, to warn as to what could happen if something were not done. I shared with the Sunday night crowd my decision to accompany the students if they desired to go to school.

Monday, December 3--I went to the stated place between 8:00 and 8:30, but no students came. A crowd of fifty or sixty white hecklers grumbled. I spent the rest of the day with the regular activities of our church program.

Tuesday, December 4--The crucial morning had arrived. Two men, one a deacon of my own church and a lawyer, the other a Methodist layman, came to walk with me and the Negro children. The hecklers had increased to two hundred, and the air was very tense. The Negro students came. We joined them, the three of us, and walked into the school with them a block away. Hecklers closed in as we walked. After staying in the school building for about five minutes, I came out with every intention to walk straight to church and the day's tasks. About a block from the school, but still three blocks from the church, I felt very much alone. The other two laymen had gone out of the school building by another route. All of the few city policemen were busy directing traffic. I stepped into the police station, but no policeman was there. I continued on the sidewalk toward the church, but at the corner was attacked by four men. After fleeing from them, across the street (and I think I ran backward about as fast as Elijah ran from Jezebel) I was finally slugged by my accoster right on the nose. (It's big enough--he couldn't miss.)

It was city election day. In that small community the word traveled fast. A slate of stable people were pitted against a slate of radical white Citizens Council candidates for Mayor and City Alderman. Everybody felt that the stable group would be elected, but knew that the radicals were going to come out in force. The good citizenship of the town took the cue from the morning incident (the attack on me) and poured out to the polls. All day long, as an expression of their own deep feelings, the stable group of citizens filled the polls, electing stable candidates by a five-to-one majority. I guess this was providential, for the citizenship of Clinton, by and large, knew exactly what they wanted now, and their vote was their way of supporting me.

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Friday-- Our deacons met to decide whether to let CBS and Edward R. Murrow's team film a documentary on the situation, starting with the filming of our Sunday services. To the joy of my own heart, the deacons stood with me to a man. A veteran doctor in the community made a statement to me I shall never forget. "Paul," he said, "if you'd asked my advice before this, I would have never advised you to do this, but now that you have done it, I want to say I'm glad." The whole church stood with me in fine fashion. Less than half a dozen people stayed away for a few weeks. Two or three never did come back. The Federal Court stepped in and Federal Judge Robert Taylor of Knoxville indicted the White Citizens Council leaders. John Kasper was later found guilty and sent to prison. About eight local citizens were found guilty and put on probation, and were told strictly to toe the line. As far as I know, they did.

My church leaders rallied to my personal support and needs in a marvelous way. Our Sunday School superintendent and his wife spent the first night in our home, with floodlights on every corner of the house. This floodlight situation lasted for a month. Another young deacon of the church personally hired a guard who sat up all night for two nights seeing that no one approached my home with malicious intent.

Continuing Insights

I have these words to pass on to church leadership in situations of this sort:

1. Follow the Person who is the supreme church leader, Jesus Christ. I shall always be grateful to Russell Reed who taught me Christian sociology, Union University, and faced with us students the issue of race; for Dr. Olin T. Binkley, who led this young ignorant student in the seminary to know something about God's will for human life and society; for Dr. Ralph Phelps whom I heard discuss the issue of race at Ridgecrest in August of that critical year and whose teaching there helped me feed my people at Clinton with the truth from God's Word about race. I came to know Jesus Christ better through these human teachers.

2. Feel with the people through their struggles. I remember the couple in our church who became most radical in following John Kasper. I sat for almost two hours listening to their villification of community leaders and their determination to stop desegregation. I counseled them later in my church office before they finally left our church. Instead of rushing to the public rostrum, I think it a sane thing for the man who wants to lead to learn what his people are thinking and feeling and listen to them intently. Kasper himself followed the tactic of working behind the scenes and I think a church leader can many times work behind the scenes prior to a propitious time for public pronouncement. We ought to be as wise as serpents. Our citizens and church members are going to have to live with whatever changes are made. It is not easy for them to make these changes. The church pastor might spout off his pronouncements with wonderful oratory but he can also move on and avoid living with the problems that are going to be there day in and day out.

3. Fathom community politics. I'm glad I took time to know what the Mayor was thinking, what the Aldermen were contemplating, what the County Judge and members of the County Court really thought and felt, how the local newspaper editor reacted and especially how the County School Superintendent and the local school principal felt. I really learned something about the political minutiae in that experience. I found out, for instance, that two very important leaders were not on speaking terms and would not go to see each other in this crisis, but whose coming together for mutual planning might have worked out a solution to the situation much earlier and without as much calamity. I got an impression about the importance of all citizens and especially elected officials being unreservedly committed to democracy. I grew in my appreciation that ours is a government of laws, not of men. I grew in my determination to work more for democracy, for if our citizens and leadership had been completely dedicated to democracy, no real crisis would have developed. The newspaper editor, Horace Wells, demonstrated some of the greatest responsible citizenship and journalism I

have ever witnessed and frankly, I feel I could never have gotten by with what I did had it not been for his good work as a Christian democratic editor of a newspaper. Know what is happening in the community among community leaders and businessmen.

4. Faithfully remain gospel centered. If a church leader is an "opportunist" it will show up here. A ministry to all people and to the whole person means that we should not get off on a tangent, substituting a part for the whole. I had a church ministry to fulfill involving more than the race issue, even when that race issue was crucial. Many invitations came after the turning point of December 4: to speak in Atlanta, in Alabama, in New York, in Philadelphia, in Detroit, in San Diego. I could have made some money, but I'm still poor. I didn't go. I had a church to lead in its weekly program, and personal ministries to my people. I just wanted 1300 members of First Baptist Church of Clinton to want me, not those big crowds in big cities. The church leader must forego any chance to receive glory to himself when it robs Christ of his leadership within the church through that leader.

5. The church leader must forgive those who do things that hurt him. I'm glad I can say I never held it against that fellow who hit me or the others who slandered and threatened my family in many ways. I had the gracious opportunity to offer my attacker my forgiveness when he returned to my home a couple of months later to ask it. It was a blessed privilege.

Some church leaders around the country helped me much. Preston Ramsey, now deceased, wrote from Somerset, Kentucky, saying, "Paul, watch your conscience now." It helped. Gordon Clinard, Fort Worth, Texas called me long distance. Franklin Paschall called long distance. Hundreds of friends wrote assuring me of their prayers. Harry Emerson Fosdick and others telegraphed.

Professor Johnson wrote from the seminary saying, "Hallelujah, it was a Baptist." I heard later of an African missionary who held up a copy of Time magazine with the stories and pictures in it, saying, "Here is what the Christian really thinks in America." This was my reqard.

In conclusion I want to tell you about a Jewish man named Gelb who came to my study. We engaged in conversation about our beliefs. He wound up the conversation by saying, "You know, this is what I can't understand! Why the Christs (and he would name any courageous advocate of truth of any generation to be a Christ) of every generation are crucified!" He helped me see something about being a Christian. I said to him, "You know, that's really what the Christian life is. Christ came to a needy world that needed Him desperately. He suffered at the hands of that world, but He overruled what the world did to Him to win a victory. This is what Christian living really is, going into society and giving your life to people who are in a mess, and getting crucified while you bring redeeming love and truth!"

The resurrected Lord assures all who are "crucified with him" that they will also reign with Him.